

Including Head Start Data in an ECIDS: Navigating Source System Vendors

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For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.

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Head Start is one of the most comprehensive early childhood programs offering services to children and families. Including Head Start data in early childhood integrated data systems (ECIDSs) helps states build a complete picture of existing early childhood services and identify service gaps and opportunities for partnerships. Additionally, by being part of a state ECIDS, Head Start grantees can access data from other county- and state-level programs and organizations that can be used for community assessment planning, school readiness reports, program evaluation, and other federal requirements related to their services and data collections.

Head Start grantees often contract with information technology (IT) vendors for data-related services, which can make obtaining Head Start data challenging. This brief provides tips for state ECIDS project staff members when partnering with Head Start grantees to obtain data from vendors.

Getting Started: Establishing Collaboration Between the ECIDS and Head Start

Understand the Head Start data environment

Head Start programs collect and use a variety of data to identify program strengths and needs, develop and implement plans that address those needs,

and continually evaluate their compliance with performance standards and their progress toward achieving program goals. Each grantee must meet all reporting requirements outlined in federal legislation. The Office of Head Start provides guidance about what data grantees should collect and at what level of detail. The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework offers specific language on data use, and Regulation 1307 enforces accountability via data-driven decisions.

Promote the benefits of the ECIDS to grantees

Head Start grantees need clear, concise information about what an ECIDS is and how it can help them. Let them know how their data can answer critical program and policy questions when integrated with other early childhood data, including questions about access to services and school readiness.

Establish data sharing agreements

Integrating Head Start data into an ECIDS requires appropriate data sharing agreements. Because some states have dozens of local Head Start grantees, ECIDS project staff members may need to spend a lot of time and effort putting these agreements in place. The data sharing agreements should clearly identify which data elements the Head Start grantees will share and how they will provide the data for use in the ECIDS.

Learn More

For more information about establishing data sharing agreements with Head Start grantees, see the Privacy Technical Assistance Center's *Case Study #2: Head Start Program* at <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/resources/case-study-2-head-start-program>.

Identifying and Resolving Vendor Contract Provisions That Might Hinder Data Integration

Any changes to a Head Start grantee's vendor contract to allow it to share data with the ECIDS typically will require a change order and will have associated costs to the grantee. The first step in helping Head Start grantees understand potential costs is to learn about the vendors. Consider surveying Head Start grantees to identify the vendors and the software versions that they use. Survey questions can include the following:

1. How are you collecting and reporting the information required by federal mandates? For example, are you using a vendor data product, a product built internally, a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, or a paper collection?
2. If you are using a vendor product, who is the vendor, what is the product, why and how are you using it, and what version are you using?

Remember that the survey's purpose is to learn about vendor products. Grantees using an internally built product or an Excel spreadsheet can access their own data and share data with the ECIDS more easily.

Next, ECIDS staff should work with Head Start grantees to review vendor service-level agreements and other related documents to identify methods of accessing their data and any additional costs. This review will reveal any clauses or restrictions that potentially could prevent the Head Start grantee from integrating data with the ECIDS. For example, a vendor contract may limit the number of reports and customizations that the grantee can make in an existing system. In this case, the ECIDS team and Head Start grantee may need to clarify to the vendor that ECIDS integration will require a dataset or a copy of the grantee's own data rather than a new report or system customization. Allow the vendor to provide options for fulfilling the request, and offer resources from the lead ECIDS agency, such as IT staff, to assist when possible.

In general, there are five methods of accessing data from a vendor-hosted data system to include in an ECIDS. Each method has benefits and limitations (**TABLE 1** on page 3).

Developing Talking Points to Request Data From Vendors

As the vendor's client, the Head Start grantee must remain the primary point of contact with the vendor when requesting data for the ECIDS. If an ECIDS project leader or other state official contacts the vendor directly requesting access to the Head Start grantee's data, the vendor will deny the request because the vendor is not authorized to release the data. A vendor also may say that the data request is not covered by its service agreement with the grantee.

The ECIDS project team can help Head Start grantees ensure clear communication with vendors in several ways.

Start conversations with questions, not demands

Avoid statements such as "we need all our data," as they are unrealistic and can make the vendor reluctant to continue the conversation. Explain that the state has a reason for including particular data elements in the ECIDS, and demonstrate the relationship between program and policy questions and the data elements coming from each of the Head Start vendor systems. Give Head Start representatives the opportunity to serve on all governing committees for the ECIDS. This involvement will help Head Start representatives understand data use and security issues, as well as involve them in decisions about the data that are made publicly available.

Determine how—not whether—the Head Start grantee can access its data

The Head Start grantee can begin conversations with its vendor by asking, "How can we gain direct access to our data?" To identify and address any quality issues, it is important that the Head Start grantee receives and reviews the data before they are incorporated into the ECIDS.

Costs, complexity, or other prohibiting factors might make it impossible to access data in the vendor's system directly, or the vendor might not offer that service. In these cases, look for alternative approaches by asking additional questions, such as the following:

1. What are the system's capabilities for data extraction and/or interoperability with other systems?
2. Do any of your other clients integrate their data with other internal or external programs or agencies?
3. Can we help your team resolve any technical challenges?

TABLE 1. Methods of accessing data in vendor-hosted data systems

Method	Description	Benefits	Limitations
Application reports or exports	Provide data through existing application reports or export capability	No additional vendor requirements; reports are easily accessible online	No real-time access to data; reports typically include limited subsets of data and require manual processes to run
Manual database backup or export	Provides a copy of the database with complete data in native format	Requires minimal effort from vendor	No real-time access to data; data access requires a database license; vendor may not be willing to share data model
Secure File Transfer Protocol (FTP) export	Provides flat file exports of required datasets	Simplified data structures; can be consumed easily	No real-time access to data; files typically include only defined subsets of data; loading can be cumbersome; vendor programming may be required
Application programming interface (API)	Provides web endpoint (e.g., RESTful web service) to consume data	Real-time access to data; automated transfer and consumption	Significant programming required
Virtual private network (VPN)	Provides direct network connection to native database	Real-time access to data; automated transfer and consumption; ability to create custom datasets as needed	Requires network connection to vendor and knowledge of database and programming to build datasets

Discuss the potential for the ECIDS project team to work directly with the vendor

Vendors might be hesitant to complete or consider any requests from the ECIDS team that are not outlined in a contract or initiated directly by their client, the Head Start grantee. Grantees can include provisions in their vendor contracts—or revise contracts as appropriate—to allow for identified third parties to work directly with the vendor on behalf of the grantee.

Document the Data Needed From the Vendor, the Format, and Frequency

Work with Head Start grantees to develop a standard communication document that grantees can share with their vendors to request access to their data and, more importantly, the reason for the request. Vendors may not have the capacity to support the request, or they may believe that fulfilling it could compromise their internal security controls. A formal document helps open communications to identify and address concerns and potential roadblocks. ECIDS teams also can provide and support opportunities for cross collaboration and partnerships with the vendor.

The communication document should address the following:

1. *Data elements.* Head Start grantees must collect certain data to ensure that they are providing services and meeting program requirements. In vendor systems, these data generally are within each child's file or record and are not necessarily aggregated for other purposes. Vendors will need to know exactly which data elements are being requested for the ECIDS and the domains in which they reside. Keep in mind that vendors may use different terms for the data elements than the ECIDS. Consider framing data requests using the Common Education Data Standards (<http://ceds.ed.gov/>), which provides a common set of data element names and definitions across the education domain.
2. *Format.* Data can be shared in several formats, including spreadsheets, HTML, database extracts, and direct exports or imports. For this reason, the ECIDS team should specify the data format it needs. Head Start grantee staff members may be unfamiliar with data outside their own requirements or may not understand technical

Tip

Make sure that staff members from both the Head Start grantee and the ECIDS understand timelines for data requests. For example, Head Start grantees complete annual checks of health, wellness, and other assessment data, in addition to completing Program Improvement Reports. They may not be able to respond to ECIDS data requests while these activities are in progress. Develop and share a calendar of important dates that impact data integration efforts.

requirements. The ECIDS team can offer training for Head Start grantees to better understand and communicate the value of incorporating their data into the ECIDS. The team also can create templates listing data elements, format requirements, and research questions to be answered by the Head Start data in the ECIDS.

3. *Frequency.* Specify in the request to the vendor how often the Head Start data will be delivered and integrated into the ECIDS (e.g., quarterly, annually). Vendors may be more receptive to “snapshot” data files from a given date rather than real-time data.

State Example: Sharing and Using Head Start Data in Georgia

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) operates the state’s ECIDS, known as the Cross-Agency Child Data System (CACDS). CACDS gathers data from numerous early childhood programs to measure enrollment within and across services, such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C and Part B programs, home visiting programs, and prekindergarten. It also collects data from Georgia’s 32 Head Start grantees.

Collaborating with Head Start grantees

DECAL signed agreements with Head Start grantees in 2012 to include selected data in CACDS. The director for Georgia’s Head Start Collaboration Office, also housed at DECAL, delivered presentations and communicated closely with the Head Start grantees to secure their support, highlighting CACDS’s goals and how the grantees could benefit from sharing their data. The director also addressed grantees’ concerns by clarifying that the state would not use their data to compare the performance of one Head Start program to another. In the years since the data sharing agreements first were signed, the CACDS team has continued to respond to Head Start grantees’ questions and

concerns, especially as new grantee leaders, who previously were unfamiliar with the agreements, have come on board.

Receiving and integrating data from vendors

Most Head Start grantees in Georgia use ChildPlus products and services for their data systems. The remaining grantees use one of three other vendors.

DECAL’s CACDS team initially worked with ChildPlus to build an interface to share Head Start site information and enrollment data. Over time, DECAL decided not to continue paying the vendor’s fees to use the interface and began manually incorporating Head Start data into CACDS. The CACDS team now receives four Microsoft Excel files from Head Start grantees’ ChildPlus systems and reformats the data using automated processes. About half of the grantees using ChildPlus give the CACDS team direct access to their data systems to extract the data; others create the data files themselves to send to CACDS. Receiving data files from each ChildPlus grantee and integrating the data into CACDS takes about 2 months.

For Head Start grantees using other data system vendors, CACDS receives data either through a vendor-built interface or in data files from the grantee. One Head Start grantee sends data to CACDS monthly as part of an existing data workflow process. The remaining grantees send data to CACDS once a year.

Using Head Start data

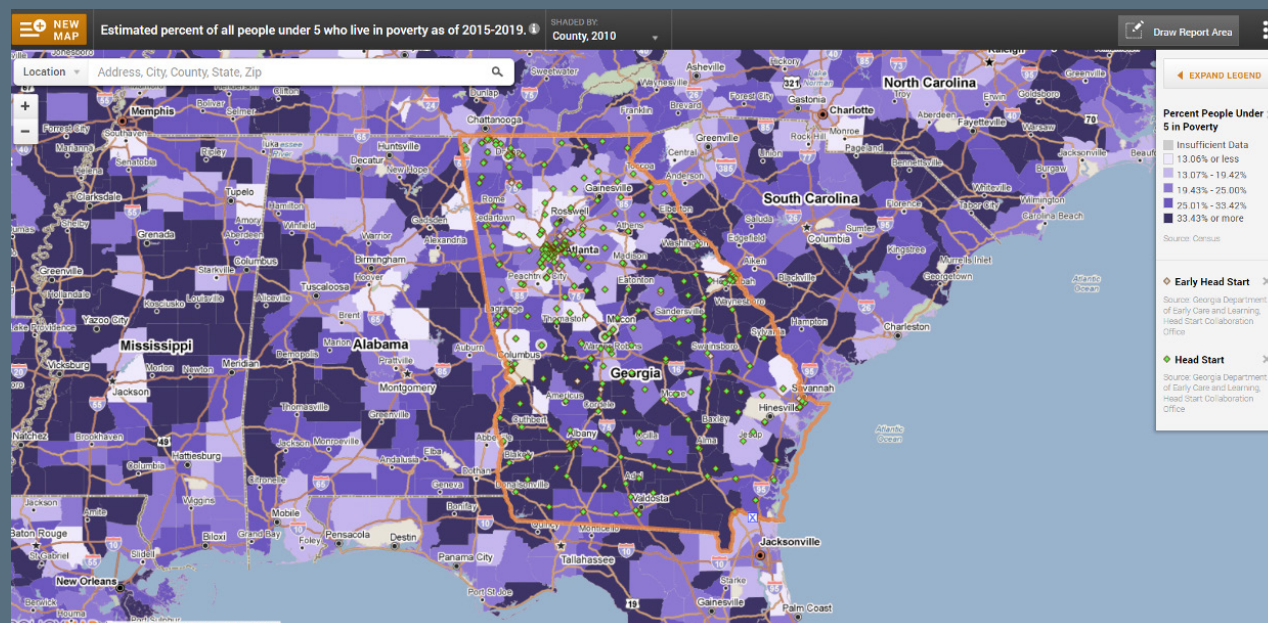
Head Start data in CACDS include child identifiers, addresses, and demographics; program enrollment dates and locations; and provider and site names, addresses, and other administrative information. These data help answer questions from CACDS’s research agenda, which was developed with input from its participating programs and agencies. The first phase of the research agenda includes two questions related to Head Start:

1. What counties in Georgia do not have Head Start? What counties in Georgia do not have Early Head Start?
2. How many 3-year-old children are served in each county?

Future phases of the research agenda may integrate Head Start data with information from other CACDS partners to answer additional enrollment and outcomes questions.

The Get Georgia Reading Campaign uses data from CACDS and the U.S. Census to map rates of young children in poverty alongside Head Start and Early Head

FIGURE 1. The Get Georgia Reading Campaign used data from CACDS and the U.S. Census to map rates of young children in poverty alongside Head Start and Early Head Start sites.



Start sites (FIGURE 1). The CACDS team also is exploring how its data might help Head Start grantees complete their required community assessments in the future.

Conclusion

The ECIDS team should communicate continually with Head Start grantees to develop both short- and long-term plans for integrating Head Start data into the ECIDS. By thoroughly understanding the Head Start grantees' contracts with their vendors and the technical aspects of the vendors' data systems, the ECIDS team can help the grantees make more effective data requests.

After determining the vendors, products, and applications that Head Start grantees use, the ECIDS team can better identify the scope of work needed to integrate Head Start data into the ECIDS. If a majority of grantees use a single vendor product, the ECIDS team may be able to work more effectively with that vendor. The vendor can create a report or system customization only once to allow all of its Head Start clients to provide the same information to the ECIDS. By working together, Head Start grantees and the ECIDS team may be able to encourage vendors to make changes from which all customers in the state—and possibly beyond—could benefit.

Additional Resources

Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems Toolkit
<https://slsds.ed.gov/#program/ecids-toolkit>

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
<http://www.decal.ga.gov/>

Get Georgia Reading Campaign: Find Data
<https://getgeorgiareading.org/data/find-data/>

Head Start Act
<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/law>

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-parent-family-community-engagement-framework>

Linking Head Start Data with Early Care and Education Coordinated Data Systems
<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/linking-head-start-data-with-early-care-and-education-coordinated-data-systems>

SLDS Issue Brief: What Is an Early Childhood Integrated Data System?
<https://slsds.ed.gov/#communities/pdc/documents/4441>